DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 948 SP 014 921

AUTHOR Watt, Anne S.
TITLE The Role of a Rural Teacher Center in Developing and Delivering Inservice Education.
PUB DATE Nov 78
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the National Council of States for Inservice Education Conference (San Francisco, CA, November 16-18, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Organization: Cooperative Planning: Delivery Systems: Governance: *Inservice Teacher Education: *Program Development: *Rural Education: *Teacher Administrator Relationship: *Teacher Centers: Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Teacher centers that are run by teachers and staffed by competent professionals can help administrators recognize and value professioanl behavior in teachers. They can play a major role in developing and delivering inservice education if they place major emphasis on attending to teachers' individual needs for professioanl growth through bottom-up programming. But they must also attune themselves from the outset to helping foster collaboration between teachers and administrators to meet district, top-down goals. A teacher center is an ideal setting for such a collaboration as long as it can win the trust of teachers by never compromising its nonevaluative stance and by spending a majority of its time responding to individual needs and offering voluntary programs based on those needs. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Please return if not accepted.

Watt
22 Hamilton Ave.
Hastings-on-Hudson, N. Y. 10706

ED180948

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"The Role of a Rural Teacher Center in Developing and Delivering Inservice Education"

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Anne S. Watt

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by Anne S. Watt
Mountain Towns' Teacher Center
Wilmington, Vermont 05363

SP 014921

Presented at the National
Council of States for
Inservice Education
Conference, November 16-18, 1978
San Francisco

THE ROLE OF A RURAL TEACHER CENTER

IN DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING INSERVICE EDUCATION

The teacher center can, and probably should, become a meeting ground for two radically different approaches to inservice education. Until quite recently inservice programming was characterized by centrally planned, mandated instructional improvement programs, mostly designed to "fill the gaps" in teachers' knowledge and skills training. The assumption underlying this "top-down" approach was that teachers are technicians rather than professionals, whose skills need periodic improvement.(McLaughlin and Berman, 1977).

In the past few years research has shown that programs which start from the assumption that teachers are basically competent professionals who want to improve their skills and are capable of planning and carrying out their own professional growth activities, may have more enduring effects. This is the "bottom-up", organic or developmental approach to inservice. (Devaney, 1977; Feiman, 1978).

Up to now this latter approach has attracted little federal spending. The norm has been to support large scale programs promising remediation of instructional deficiencies. In 1977, two hundred and twenty-two million federal dollars were spent for the professional development of educational personnel. Yet a Rand study of this period reported that 85-95% of the government change-agent projects under its scrutiny failed to show any sustained effects. (Scheinfeld, 1978). Evidence against the effectiveness of large scale, top-down inservice programs is piling up.

Last summer about sixty teacher centers were funded by USOE under a new federal Teacher Centers Program. The regulations specify a stronger role for teachers than ever before in shaping their own inservice programs. While

this is a new chapter in the federal lexicon, there is already plenty of precedent for developmental programs among more than one hundred thirty teacher centers associated with the Teachers Centers Exchange of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (Lance et al. 1977, 1978). And there are also examples of large scale, top-down teacher center delivery systems like the 4 state-wide networks created by OE in the early 1970s.

But there are not many examples where both a top-down and a bottom-up program exists simultaneously in one center.[1] This is not surprising, for the underlying assumptions about teacher change in deficiency and organic programs are really very different. Yet in one rural teacher center these two streams of influence have blended recently, resulting in active collaboration between teachers and administrators over the development and delivery of an inservice program.

This paper looks at how and why this blend of approaches took place in the Mountain Towns' Teacher Center in southern Vermont, and notes some painful lessons learned which may be instructive for new teacher centers as they develop policy and implement their inservice programs.

Setting

For nearly four years the Mountain Towns' Teacher Center operated as a purely organic, developmental center supporting only voluntary, individualized, teacher-controlled programs. It grew out of an extension course in informal education. One teacher in the class wrote an ESEA Title III proposal for a teacher center where teachers could meet informally and over extended periods of time to promote good, child-centered teaching practices. The Vermont Department of Education funded the proposal in April, 1974. An attractive classroom in one school was donated to provide a congenial meetingplace for

[1] Evans and Kilgore (1978) suggest that the Syracuse University Teaching Center is an example of collaboration between the university and school district.

geographically isolated teachers, parents and community members. Material resources, courses, workshops, an informal verbal linkage system between people, resources and schools, and an in-school advisory program, were made available to about one hundred thirty N-12 teachers.

The geographical area included fifteen small public and private schools spread over three hundred fifty square miles, and parts of three school districts.

This isolated mountainous section of southern Vermont is heavily wooded and sparsely populated. The largest town has a population of 1,804. With an average of 74 students per school, eight of the public schools have four or fewer full time staff and are run by teaching principals. Most schools are twenty to forty-five minutes driving time from the teacher center. The nearest institution of higher education is thirty-two miles away in another state. The Mountain Towns' Teacher Center (hereafter MTTC) opened with one and one-half staff members and gradually expanded from a budget of $26,000 to $40,000 which supported two professional staff and two office workers during the fourth year.

Program

Perhaps the most significant and least documentable activity of the teacher center has been to provide connecting links between people, ideas and resources in isolated schools and communities. These links have included publicizing and arranging for students from seven schools to visit a science fair in another school, sharing one third grade teacher's art idea with another third grade teacher in a school 43 miles away, showing a teaching principal in one district a simple newsletter put out by a colleague in another district, suggesting and offering to guide a field trip to a beaver pond or helping a scout leader plan an activity. A monthly newsletter and two telephone lines greatly facilitated these informal networking activities.

Although inspired by an early childhood open-education philosophy, the center soon found that with such a small population it needed to become more eclectic. Hands-on workshops and informal drop-ins drew only a few teachers into the center at a time. But teacher-requested center-sponsored graduate courses were immediately popular, partly due to the savings in travel time to distant campuses. In fact the director eventually became a higher education broker for the whole of southern Vermont. She developed a consortium arrangement between five colleges and universities where the teacher center hired local instructors, organized and administered graduate courses, and offered multiple credit for each course.

Rural schools and rural communities have many traditional, overlapping bonds. The teacher center felt a responsibility to provide programs for parents and the general public including training Volunteers for the 3Rs, a public lecture series on educational issues and twenty adult education courses annually.

But by far the most significant impact on classroom teaching came from the Advisor Program[1]. which grew out of the teachers' requests that the center bring its resources directly to them in their isolated small schools. The two teacher center advisors brought strictly non-evaluative, personal support to teachers, teaching principals and some principals. focusing on responding concretely to their own self-defined, immediate needs.

One example of MTTC's advisor work was with a sixth grade teacher who asked the MTTC staff to help her plan and teach an art history unit over ten weeks. Books, posters, an art historian and local artists were identified and brought in, and a field trip taken to a famous museum. Three MTTC staff members

---

1. See Devaney, (1977) for several articles clarifying the difference between advisors, supervisors, curriculum coordinators, etc.

helped with different aspects of the unit, including actual teaching. Students used the teacher center for research. Their biographies of famous painters were widely publicized among MTTC schools.

During the third year alone, the two MTTC advisors each spent about two days a week working with teachers in their own classrooms. They made two hundred thirty visits to fourteen schools and spent 369 hours with teachers and students, assisting with a child or lesson, demonstrating a new technique, helping to organize space, counseling about a personal or professional issue, providing books and materials, problem-solving and helping to plan curriculum units. Teachers initiated most of these requests for service. Eventually both advisors began to observe patterns, possibly sequential ones, in the types of teacher requests for support. These were rather similar to the categories of "Teacher Perceptions of Support from Advisors" developed by Bussis, Chittenden and Amarel (1976)[1].

Extensive private journals kept over three years easily reveal that the most meaningful and exhilarating teacher center work occurred between students, individual teachers and advisors in their own classrooms. Here change could be literally seen and felt over weeks, months and sometimes years of sustained contact. For in their own classrooms the teacher's sense of efficacy originates and develops, and this personal sense of efficacy, according to Berman and McLaughlin (Rand, 1978, p. 32) is the single most powerful teacher characteristic affecting positive results in change agent projects.

Thus, for the first three and one half years the MTTC program was entirely

---

1. These authors have developed a systematic classification of eleven kinds of teachers' perceptions of support from advisors. MTTC advisors agreed with all eleven categories and added one other, the advisor as 'linker between teachers with a common need or interest'. It was also felt that there may be a developmental sequence to teacher needs for support in their jobs, and the MTTC eagerly anticipates further research in this area.

voluntary. It developed and was modified in response to individual teacher input and lots of casual needs assessments. It was organic and developmental.

Governance

The teachers in the graduate course who helped gain support from the fifteen schools for the initial proposal, became the core of the first Governing Board, which soon expanded to include one teacher representative from each of the 15 tiny schools. They hired the first director and assistant director of the teacher center. Meeting once a month, the Board and staff informally developed policy, guided the program and managed the federal grant, all without any input from superintendents of the three participating districts. The completely laissez-faire attitude taken by these superintendents may have stemmed from the low key focus in the original proposal on simple sharing of cheap materials, resources and ideas. This major goal appeared neither to threaten nor to interfere with district policies. It was even explicitly stated that the center must not become a burden to superintendents.

Such an extraordinary amount of freedom from administrative control was at first exhilarating for teachers and MTTC staff, although in the long run, as Berman and McLaughlin (1978) found out, a lack of administrative support from the very start may be one factor that contributes to any innovative project's eventual inability to take root locally.

Initially growth-oriented teachers with leadership potential gave hours and hours of volunteer after-school time to the life of the teacher center. Without the usual credit, released time or monetary incentives, they ran the center and participated in its programs. Gradually, lack of interference from principals or superintendents began to feel less like freedom and more like lack of interest and support for activities which center participants felt were contributing significantly to their growth as professionals.

So all fifteen principals were invited to join the Governing Board during the second year. This attempt to interest principals in the Center, which would have decreased teacher control of the Board from 100% to 50%, proved a flop! Only the teaching principals, who view themselves primarily as teachers, attended some meetings and made occasional use of the center for themselves. Full time administrators stayed away, possibly distrusting the amount of sheer energy for educational improvement emanating from the center.

During the third year two new district superintendents and a new teacher center director came on the scene. All three were immediately interested in the Center's relationship to districts. They were also concerned about the teacher center's stance in the organizational framework, but in different ways. A period of confusion and misunderstandings followed which was finally resolved through the mediation of a federal programs officer, who helped bring the free-wheeling little center into an organizational relationship with the supervisory union in which it was located. Management of federal funds was transferred to a central office. The superintendent was placed on the Governing Board and quarterly policy meetings were scheduled to "improve communications."

Despite what seemed at the time to be major structural changes, it soon became clear that the teacher-dominated Governing Board was still in charge of the teacher center. The superintendent began to show signs of actively supporting the center, even though building principals continued to maintain their distance. At the state level superintendents were envied and praised for having such an active teacher center. The center responded by asking to be a dissemination link for state department programs and information. The long distance impact of the center ironically seemed to attract more administrative attention than what was happening in their own schools! Eventually the

development of a major new grant proposal and the hosting of a national rural teacher centers' Workparty[1] brought on several significant initiatives by administrators requesting direct services from the teacher center for themselves.

Top-down Collaboration Begins in the Fourth Year

There is quite a difference between being told by an administrator to plan a program for teachers, and being asked to collaborate with an administrator and teachers to plan an inservice activity. Fortunately the latter happened to the Mountain Towns' Teacher Center, three times during the center's fourth year.

In the first instance one elementary principal asked the director to join her teachers in planning their staff-development activities. Jointly they requested that the director facilitate sessions on trust-building, programming for the gifted, teacher evaluation, magic circle and the teaching of writing. These sessions were held in the school over several months with individual in-classroom follow-up from the teacher center director, when requested. All members of the staff participated as did the principal, who took time after every session to analyze the interactions with the teacher center advisor and determine her own follow-up.

The second case was slightly different. Another principal, when asked what the center could do for him, suggested that he could use a graduate course on teacher evaluation during the summer. The center responded by asking superintendents if they would "encourage" their principals to take such a course. A positive response led the director to seek out a respected colleague who brought a humanistic perspective to the topic in a course entitled "The Principal as Staff Developer and Evaluator". Seven of the area principals

---

1. Sponsored by the Teachers' Centers Exchange of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development.

took the course, which required them to plan staff-development activities for the next year and urged them to use all available resources including the teacher center.

The third example of collaboration was the most significant. In the spring of 1978, the most supportive superintendent decided that the teacher center could help him by planning, budgeting and running two full days of district-wide inservice on PL 94-142, mainstreaming the handicapped. Teacher center staff approached its Board, which decided it must comply with this request. So with some trepidation, the center staff agreed to take a major role in this top-down project.

The first and most important step was to seek expert advice and form a planning team. The district's six Special Education teachers were the ideal choice and were delighted to be given the opportunity to become the architects of a program they needed which would be financed by the superintendent with district flow-through funds. On volunteer time, this group brought off, with teacher center support, the first required inservice day ever to be held in that district, on September 19, 1978. It was attended by ninety-one out of ninety-two teachers. Evaluations showed that only twenty felt that the program did not warrant the use of a school day while fifty-four favored a second full day's program devoted to the same topic. Thirty-one complimented the planning and food, and offered constructive comments on how to run another such day. Eight wrote negative comments. This respectable outcome pleased all three groups of planners, particularly the teacher center staff which had feared that a mandated, top-down inservice program might severely undermine its core philosophy of volunteerism.

Why Did It Work?

Three key factors undoubtedly contributing to the success of this

district mandated inservice were (1) local collaboration on program design, (2) the superintendent's respect for teachers as professionals, and (3) the reputation of the teacher center as a teacher-serving organization.

(1)Local collaboration and mutual adaptation were essential factors. The superintendent wanted a charismatic outside speaker, a good meal, plenty of teacher participation, and an evaluation. The teacher center staff planned the menu, located the speaker, and the special education teachers told her what to say, ran the day's program and the evaluation. The content of the day was determined and facilitated by teachers, for teachers.

(2)An attitude of professional respect prevailed. This was an example where the special education teachers and teacher center staff were given both the respect and trust of their district administrator to plan and implement an entire day's program with a minimum of input and no interference from him. This assumption of professional competence by a superintendent toward teachers is what McLaughlin and Berman found to be the critical factor underlying successful local staff development programs (1977, p. 194). Here the clear mandate of trust given teachers was matched by their willingness to volunteer time to plan and implement the program.

(3)The teacher center's reputation was not compromised. The MTTC had proven over nearly four years that it served teachers' needs and 'belonged' to them. It had gained a sure enough footing among its basic constituency that collaboration with a superintendent to meet his inservice goal was viewed as a challenge, not as a sell-out. This might not have been so if the center were less well established as a responsive, non-evaluative teacher support system, or if its programs had reached only a small minority of teachers in the district. In fact over 50% of the area's teachers had already participated in center programs either through courses, workshops or the Advisory.

Implications for Teacher Centers

Although the Mountain Towns' Teacher Center is deeply committed to organic inservice programming, the experience described above demonstrates in at least two respects why a commitment to the bottom-up approach probably should not be exclusive. First, while well-established teacher centers easily attract the growth-oriented minority, they need to involve a critical mass of teachers, especially in rural areas where there are few other inservice options. Second, the very survival of a teacher center after the initial federal funding period may depend on the degree to which it is felt to belong to and serve the district administrators in its local area. In this latter respect the MTTC has met what Devaney calls the challenge of relating to the local education agency while keeping its own integrity (1977, p. 22) but it may have done so too late, and with too little support from principals, to ensure its long-term continuation. This conclusion is born out in the summary of the Rand v. viii study, which makes the point that "from beginning to end, a supportive institutional environment was necessary for a project to be effectively implemented and to take root." (p. 33).

Teacher Centers and Inservice Education: Summary

Teacher centers which are run by teachers and staffed by competent professionals can help administrators recognize and value professional behavior in teachers. They can play a major role in developing and delivering inservice education if they place major emphasis on attending to teachers' individual needs for professional growth through bottom-up programming. But they must also attune themselves from the outset to helping foster collaboration between teachers and administrators to meet district, top-down goals. A teacher center would seem an ideal setting for such a collaboration as long as it can win the trust of teachers by never compromising its non-evaluative stance and by spending a majority of its time responding to individual needs and offering voluntary programs based on those needs.

REFERENCES

Berman, Paul and McLaughlin, Milbrey Wallin, Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, vol. viii. Implementing and Sustaining Innovations, Santa Monica, California, Rand Corporation, May 1978.

Ibid. v. Vii. April, 1977.

Bussis, Anne M., Chittenden, Edward A., and Amarel, Marianne, Beyond Surface Curriculum. Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1976.

Devaney, Kathleen, ed.,Essays on Teacher Centers, San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Research and Development, 1977.

Evans, Robert L., and Kilgore, Alvah, "The Syracuse University Teaching Center: A Model for Preservice/Inservice Development", Phi Delta Kappan, vol. 59 no. 8, April 1978 (pp. 539-541).

Feiman, Sharon, ed., Teacher Centers: What Place in Education? University of Chicago, Center for Policy Study, 1978.

Joyce, Bruce, Howey, Kenneth R., and Yarger, Sam J., Issues to Face, ISTE Report One, Palo Alto, California, June 1976.

Lance, Jeanne and Kreitzman, Ruth, Teachers' Centers Exchange Directory, San Francisco, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, April, 1977.

Lance, Jeanne and Piper, Barbara,Teachers' Centers Exchange Directory Supplement, San Francisco, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, May, 1978.

McLaughlin, Milbrey Wallin and Berman, Paul, "Retooling Staff Development in a Period of Retrenchment", Educational Leadership, vol. 35, no. 3, December, 1977., pp. 191-196.

Scheinfeld, Daniel R., Cichon, Ronald E., and Schaffer, Susan, "The Conditions for Educational Improvement: Implications for Teachers' Centers", paper given at the urban Teachers' Centers Work Party, New York, June 4-7, 1978.